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When They Turn.

OC OC

The six who sat in the bar knew more of each other's reputations than their actual faces, save for one shared crime; such creatures exist wherever crime flourishes and decency becomes a liability. A standing concern between them, however, lay in the shadow of a bottle of mid-range intoxicant, untouched by all six and monitored in an easy-going fashion.

After all, for such creatures, poisoning one another, whilst strictly not a crime as they understood the idea, would be considered poor behavior. Thus, they continued to wait and wait, staring at each other, quietly admiring and drawing conclusions on each other's wardrobe, firepower, armor and accoutrement, analyzing endlessly.

It was the arrival of the seventh which began their conversation in earnest.

Of the seven, five were, in a manner of speaking, mammalian, and the other two closer to insects, were such lineages capable of producing bipedal low-lives with poor dispositions and penchants for violence well outside of even apex predatory behavior.

The tallest of the seven spoke first.

"We know he's finally coming for us and we know we can either throw two of our own to him, or he'll take all seven of our heads with him."

The other six could only grumble, mostly to themselves, yet agreed: that was, in short, the issue they had to contend with, one way or another.

"I don't see why," one of the younger members of the group said, "We should obey this.. thing. We have assassins. Hells, some of us *are* assassins. We can end this issue with, what, two or three well-aimed shots? A graviton missile to their hull before they ever reach the station?" They smirked, shaking their tentacled head, sighing derisively. "Vulnerable at range, weak in hand-to-hand, and in the end, as doomed to die as any of them in a stand-up fight. You are all too easily spooked by the myths."

The eldest said nothing, only monitored, and carefully placed a pair of heavy-duty war-pistols on the table, the barrels aimed at no one in particular, simply everyone at once, and then gave them a lazy push, spinning them on their respective axis.

One of the broader, stronger members of the group, her culture descended from proud, angry sea-life with fangs, teeth-riddled skin as a shark has, and a flat, angular face, raised absent eyebrows at the youngest and chuckled darkly. "Ah," she said, "But this one is no myth. My kinmate saw it, on that day of days. This one, he did what they do, before they become butchers of all who've wrong them." And with that, she leaned in, speaking in a conspiratorial tone. "He *turned*." She then laid out a pair of

ceramic laser-fueled mercury-charged pistols, all capable of puncturing an average entity's spinal column and endangering a second party with ease.

Another of the group, his species a distant kinfolk to a variant of Earth-born mantises, gestured with a thick, clawed hand, motioning to the others as he laid down a ceremonial dagger, its edge a fractal nightmare of bioorganic obsidian, a weapon designed for quick, brutal cuts that could cleave bone from owner in milliseconds with surgical precision by even a novice, of which they were far removed. "If they turned, it's done. I ask that if one of you does the honorable thing, use this blade - quick, clean, efficient, and in the end, a noble way to die." A shrug followed, it's mate soon joining it, raising the dagger count to two.

The last one to speak simply placed a broad-headed axe on the table, laying it lengthwise on the narrow board, fine-grained wood for its handle, a burnished titanium edge on all three faces of the blade, and motioned to it. "This," he says, "Must be wielded with skill, though it is equally an honorable means to die. Certainly faster than the .. hunter .. who has stalked us to the end of the known worlds' on every map." He smirked, and shook his fin-covered piscine head. "To spare you the issue, I've also implanted a small bio-engineered detonator into my skull, so I will freely admit, I'd rather control my destiny than.. well, whatever that man has planned for us." He then pushed the axe to the middle of the no weapons-filled table, three of the tablemates looking openly relieved.

"If we have one settled, that leaves it to the other six to determine who is left with a choice," the eldest said, then nodded to all present. "If we vote, it turns into a species cartel. The carchan will vote for the mantid, who will vote for the denab, who will vote for, I believe, me." And with that, he shrugged, shaking his head. "So, we determine this in an older, more civilized fashion - as the humans do, in such instances." And with that, he placed down the only Terran weapon: a simple, inelegant chunk of fire-forged steel, brass, and iron, its basic function obvious to any present - a revolver. From within a pocket, he extracted two shells, and then raised high the gun, opened the cylinder, and inserted them into it, one spaced apart from its neighbor by two empty chambers, and then placed it atop the pile.

The second speaker, the carchan, spoke next. "We move in order, one spin each, and one trigger pull for ourselves each," she said, and then picked up the weapon, demonstrating the point by giving the wheelgun a hard, fast spin of its cylinder, and then gestured to the weapons pile. "If someone balks, everyone gets a chance to end them on the spot. Myself included." And with that, a new tension arrived at the table.

The youngest rose to his haunches, not quite to his feet, and was stilled not by a movement of caution, only a word.

"Coward."

With anger-opened eyes, he regarded the eldest, sneering, his breath raging, and shouted to him, "You're the coward! You ordered the destruction of the Earthman's home! And you!" He then aimed his ire to the mantid, flecks of spittle landing in all directions freely. "You, you set fire to his crops, and his.. stupid dog-creature! Even ate some of it, didn't you?!" With bared teeth

in a visible display of rage, he turned to face the fish-headed monstrosity, a finger waggled at the brutal creature. "You did those.. things.. to its mate, you sick bastard. Not even close to your own species, and .. eugh, grotesque. You are likely who set him to his path!"

The denab, descended from a simian-style creature, shook his head. "No, you dense bastard," he said, "You likely did. You came up with the idea of sending him the video of what had happened. Why?" He rolled his eyes. "If memory serves, 'so it will break him'." And with that, the denab picked up the pistol, and took aim on his own neck, staring at the youngest of the tablemates. "If it ends my tenure at this table early, I'll gladly go before that fucking moron." And with that, he squeezed the trigger, arriving at an empty chamber and loud click, dropping the gun in what looked like frustration and relief in equal measures.

The mantid took it up, stared at all present, and then drew a heavy, long breath, holding it in as they worked their thick, unwieldy fingers into the firearm's unfamiliar mechanics, and squeezed it, also arriving at an empty chamber, the gun dropped with a thud on the table.

It was the youngest who took it up next, giving it a hard, fast spin, and was making eye contact with the eldest when he squeezed the trigger, and a moment of awkward silence passed just after it nearly detonated in his hand.

Standing in the doorway, a Terran, easily three times the mass of the heaviest party present, half again as tall as the biggest, and with a rifle held in one hand that outshined every single firearm present, his face set in a stony gaze of cool, simmering rage.

"I reckon," he said, his voice drawled through a built-in vox translator, his throat bearing the surgical signs of its implantation countless years prior, "Some of you were going to exit early." And with that, he shot not once, not twice, but four times, his rifle dancing in his hands, the lever-action guided across his knuckles like a magician's coin, each shot blowing apart one of the paired weapons, scattering the remainder, and leaving the tablemates in stunned terror, save for one, who simply stared in defiance at the human.

It was the eldest, his nerves long-since chilled into frosty resolve, who gestured to the bottle of whiskey left untouched, and then to the empty glass it sat next to, the bullets' scorings having dug deep, angry grooves into the table's surface. "Your brand," the eldest said, and smoothed his jacket, never breaking eye contact for a moment his voice steady and calm. "As you requested." At that, the youngest, his hand leaking blue-black blood, wailed, a sound of rage and betrayal, on the cusp of shouting out exactly that, then was silenced when the rifleman simply inserted the barrel of the still-smoking gun into his mouth, demonstrating that while silence is golden, lead ensures it quickly.

"And I thank you for that small kindness, sirrah," the Terran said, taking a seat, looking from face to face. "I knew you'd be the one to arrange this, and that, sirrah, is worth another mention of my thanks. A dry well, of late, though it did run deep, once upon a time." He sounded what passed for amused, and was able to pour himself a glass of the whiskey, downing it, all with one hand rock-steady on the rifle still stuck in the angry tentacled head of the youngest at the table.

The eldest gestured lightly to the others. "Everyone you wanted, all here, all willing to either die, or sacrifice each other," he said politely. "The carchan, fresh from a funeral; the mantid, recently widowed; the denab, his.. 'girlfriend' ..missing some six cycles and counting." And then he looked to the shooter, raising his own magnificent eyebrows. "As agreed. Will you hold up your end of the bargain, as requested?"

And to this, the Terran nodded, and gestured to the door. "Make use of the exit while you still can, Mulvema, because the space between us, it certainly can still turn into tiger, just because I don't like that you so willingly sold out your friends to spare your worthless ass." He then smirked, and nodded, and at that, the eldest rose, his features betraying a passing glimpse of fear response, his hands shaking as he hurried for the exit, and the exit beyond that, and the one beyond that, until there would be no more ability to exit.

The other six at the table stared at the gunman and drew breath slowly, hands on the wooden surface, watchful, calm, and by no means less lethal. The creature with a gun barrel in his mouth, though his breathing was slightly arrested, it was done in smooth, even draws, eyes clicking carefully, absorbing the world. A table filled with takers, still consuming, unmoved by threat nor fear.

"You know what it means," the Terran said, "When we Terrans are talking and leave, then turn to face you." Five of their heads nodded and the sixth, even with a gun barrel in his mouth, did not even attempt it. The Terran regarded the youthful moron, and spoke again. "It means: the deal ends, the hunt begins, and anything, and anyone, between the speaker and the target, well.. they just won't have a happy ending. And on that day when I buried my wife, dog, and farmstead, I said, 'I'm big enough, this kind of mistake, it's easy to forgive', and do you recall what you did, just before I turned away from y'all?" He grew serious.

And the gun spoke louder than he did, although all could hear his word.

"Laugh."

And the gun began to speak at length, as did he, that one word with a variety of stressors applied, although the listeners dropped, one by one, until nobody could hear what was being said; each shot, though powerful, was aimed away from each species' instant-kill zones, targeting only nerve clusters, and in one case, the controls for a bio-bomb implant, robbing someone of their life's exit strategy entirely.

When he rose, his task apparently completed, he collected nothing from the table, save the bottle of whiskey, and was drinking it all of the way to the spaceport's dingy, long-since maintained hold, wherein lay two ships - the one which brought all seven to the table, and his own, their makes and models as different as their states of mind.

As he stood in the shadow of the repair and refueling crews, he regarded the only other person leaving the crime-ridden station, and raised his eyebrows, looking at the eldest, and now only, person who sat at the table.

"I believe," he said, his eyes twinkling, "That I told you to make yourself a scarce commodity, sirrah, and you have failed to do so." He then smiled and gestured, a polite motion, for the eldest to move ahead of him, although he didn't motion towards a gantry for boarding a vessel - rather, he gestured to the airlock leading to the darkness which spat forth tiny pinpricks of light and ate everything else, barely accepting the presence and mobility of starfaring vessels.

The eldest, finally realizing how alone they were, began to weep, and shook, a thin trail of liquid discharge running freely down down the single snake-like leg, sobbing for mercy in their native tongue, a thing of sibilant hisses and useless, sad requests. To this, the Terran had a reply.

"I was jus' playin', hoss," he said, then motioned to the now-available gantry path to the creature's ship, and chuckled darkly. "No hard feelin's, is what I have to say. Y'all is out of business an' friends, these days. Maybe take up farmin'." His tone darkened, as did his gaze, and to this, the eldest made a hasty exit, all decorum lost with bladder control, departing at full speed as soon as they were physically capable of doing so.

Once the eldest was in the nearest spacelane entry point, whilst still on the station, though barely-so, they exhaled, shaking from toe to scalp, relieved, having put a darkness into their wake, soon to be forgotten with the next purchase of some form of narcotic or similar pharmaceutical erasing agent.

Until.

Behind them, a tapping sound.

When they turned their seat, they could see the outline of the Terran's hat, his eyes glowing softly in the dim light of consoles surrounding him, a nimbus of blue-grey smoke rising from his now-lit cigarette, smirking at him cruelly. The tapping sound came from the match being tamped out on the floor with his spurred boot's heel.

"Then again, I did enjoy chasin' you," he said, and with that, he walked three steps back into the eldest creature's vessel, turning to face away from him directly, just as the doors closed, sealing him on the station proper, and beginning a new level of the nightmare.